In the Dark: the BFI Archive

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Context: the British Film Institute is in discussion with a range of bodies about the future of its library, special collections and film and television archive (the National Film and Television Archive). Currently (2007) all are accessible in one site in central London, although the audio-visual material is stored outside London in Berkhamsted.

Like most British scholars of film and television of my generation, I am formed by the British Film Institute: through its exhibition, distribution and production policies; by the Education Department, its summer schools and conferences; through BFI publications; by its promulgation of 'film culture'; and in its libraries and archives, both paper and audio-visual, in Dean Street, Charing Cross Road and Stephen Street. I owe my current occupation, and much of what I know about film and television, to the British Film Institute, and it is on the BFI archives that I thought I would write when invited to contribute to this 'In Focus'[1]. I had the idea of documenting the significance of the archives to international film and television scholarship by collating the acknowledgements given in academic and popular books to the archive and its curators and librarians, so that my contribution would consist of a long list of authors and books with their acknowledgement cited. This was such a good idea, I soon discovered, after a little preliminary research, that I could easily have filled the whole of the 'In Focus' section of *Cinema Journal*. I tried various ways of selecting which acknowledgements I would cite, but the beauty of project was lost when it was

not indiscriminate. So instead, reluctantly, rather than being a collagist, I will reflect briefly on my own passion for the dark of the archive by describing three different encounters with it.

I first went to the archive as a young teacher to watch films which I had read about, and needed to see before video was a domestic medium - long before DVDs. This archive is forever cold and snowy to me, for much of what I watched on 16mm film was Soviet cinema of the 1920s, and my own rhythms of viewing were quite Stakhanovite: so many films, so little time. With Jay Leyda to guide me, I viewed the sort of films which, even when video became available, were not going to be shown on television so that you could tape them: *Battleship Potemkin* possibly, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* never. My aim was to familiarise myself with a canon: to actually see what I had read about, and the only way of doing this was to watch films on celluloid in a dark basement viewing room.

My second example is about television. Here, what I remember is often a wondrous astonishment. I was not going to view canonised material, but instead, in a notoriously poorly archived medium, seeking to find out what was there. In the context of the lifestyling of British television, I wanted to find out what the precursors of this type of television were. While I did discover something of this, as I viewed hours of instructional, leisure, design and magazine programmes, what was almost as significant was discovering how poorly archived this type of ordinary television was. The cataloguing department of the BFI were assiduous in seeking out material that might be relevant, but it was very patchily preserved, and very little of it existed as viewing copies. It was as if the policies for the archiving of television had little

connection with some of the ways in which television was thought about academically following Raymond Williams's inaugural account of the medium[2]. If what was becoming of great interest to television scholars was the ordinariness of the medium, what was most archived were its moments of exceptionalness. Poring over the interplay of experts and ordinary people in sporadically preserved programming made when television itself was new, it was very difficult to judge what was normal and what was extraordinary in the performance of 'being on television'. Often, too, the metadata was incomplete, and so while the date of broadcasts was normally recorded, their times were rarely there. The schedule was, perhaps, both invisible and taken for granted by those early archivists of television. However viewing all the material that was available – and thus identifying the sources for the familiar clips used to signify 'funny old television' – was still illuminating, perhaps because the patchiness of the material preserved spoke more eloquently of the hours of programmes lost than a few carefully preserved, complete series and programmes would have.

My third example comes from a project about London and the cinema. In the early stages of this project, I was hoping to include film and television together, and spent many hours watching, in particular, newsreels, programmes and documentaries which included material about the River Thames. It became evident that on television there were certain key tropes used to make films about the Thames which recurred across a great many texts. For example, the dead body recovered from the River at Wapping, or the return of fish to the River now that London industry is so much reduced. Again, it was essential to this project that I could roam through material deposited in the archive, identifying what I wanted to watch through a variety of means, and I'm still planning to write up the 'London and television' material. However, what was also

important was the relationship between material held in the moving image archives and the paper archives. The BFI's Special Collections, which have, for example, outstanding archives on Ealing Studios, provide a wealth of documentation on the production, exhibition and reception of films, much of it only accessible with the help of specialist librarians. In relation to the River, I learned, for example, that the pioneering Ealing film of 1951, *Pool of London*, which starred, as one of five leads, the Bermudan-born Earl Cameron, while it took as its topic the issue of 'colour prejudice', was promoted by Ealing with a range of posters which never included an image of Cameron, although the other, white, leads were shown. These traces of marketing campaigns, of location research, of correspondence about who is paid what, allow scholars to understand the films and television programmes historically, and as historical artefacts. Although in some ways less glamorous than celluloid, paper too is precious and must be preserved.

The first of these stories recounts a use of the Archive that technology has – pretty much - made redundant. Most of the film canon is now available commercially to a much wider audience than people employed to teach film studies, and this can only be celebrated. But the second two, in different ways, involve the intricate relationship between scholarship and the archive which demands a moment of encounter when the scholar does not know what she may find. This moment, which can eventually be generative of many things: books, articles, film seasons, television programmes, dvds, streamed programming, mediathèque releases, is a moment of which many scholars in many disciplines have written[3]. It is an encounter with an undisciplined trace; with something not yet put into words. And it is the possibility of this

encounter that must be preserved if film and televisions scholars are going to learn new things, instead of just circulating the same old stories.

As I live outside London, going to the Archive always requires a journey. And I do, literally, travel hopefully. I hope that what I going to see will render up this moment. I have recently been watching the 1978 BBC series *Law and Order* as part of a larger project about crime and policing on British television[4]. I hadn't seen it for nearly thirty years, but I travelled to the BFI hoping that it would be as good as I remembered it. This anticipation is like an extra-textual suspense. The journey, always a careful calculation about the relative costs of an early train (which gets you there when the archive opens, but is three times more expensive), or a very intensive, shortened viewing day, is conducted in a peculiar spirit of immanence. The nature of the British public transport infrastructure – crudely, all railway lines lead to London – means that it is much easier to travel into London than to places quite near it, like Berkhamsted (where most of the film and television material is stored), which may be geographically closer to your starting point. It is a pilgrimage on a rush-hour train. And then the joy, in the dark, of becoming lost in the world of the fiction. And *Law and Order* is as good as I remembered, and as I didn't remember much of the detail, in some ways it is even better. And I can't wait to go back and watch it again, as I think about how I will shape what I will write. Must do it soon, while I still can.

[1] The British Film Institute funded lectureships at five British Universities in the 1970s to develop the teaching of film.
[2] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).
[3] Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).
[4] *Law and Order*, 4 90 minute plays, written by G.F.Newman, directed by Leslie Blair, produced by Tony Garnett (tx.April, 1978).